Solitude of bruises

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Solitude of bruises

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Notes

June 29 - | Bruises |

Title from the poem Edge of February

Also- I turned 18 today!!

Will was used to being the odd one out at school. They moved around too much, and he was too weird anyway, to make many friends. It all combined to years of eating in the library, or a stairwell, or the far end of a lunch table, and never being invited to anyone else's house for sleepovers or school projects. The orphanage was just another place he didn't fit.

He was smaller than most kids his age, a combination of lack of food and a family history of late bloomers. It made him an easy target for the boys at the orphanage who wanted to feel bigger than someone else by hurting them. They made him hate his empathy, being forced to see their fears and hatred's and every emotion every time they caught him. He couldn't turn it off, so instead he got good at hiding from them, and knew all the best spots within a couple weeks of being at the orphanage.

There was another boy who was odd at the orphanage. Not quite like him, Will didn't think the boy saw as much as he did, all the time. He didn't think anyone saw like him. He hoped no one else did, he wouldn't wish it on anyone, even the older boys who hurt him to feel better about themselves, or because they enjoyed hurting people.

No, this boy was different because he was quiet, and his meanness was sharper than the other boys. He didn't hurt anyone, unless they really messed with him and deserved it, but he also didn't talk. Not once, in the whole month Will has been there. It made him an excellent companion when hiding from the others, once Will had realized he wouldn't hurt him too.

The boy, Hannibal, liked listening to Will talk about what he saw in other people, and never yelled at him or hit him for it. Will liked Hannibal.

"Peter says he's going to join the army once he's old enough, but he's scared. I think he's afraid they won't want him either, and then he'll really be all alone. What do you want to do when you grow up?"

Hannibal shrugged, which was his normal response. Occasionally, if needed, Hannibal would write out an answer, but usually he just nodded or shrugged or gave Will a Look that expressed his meaning without having to talk. He was a year older than Will, and had been here much longer, but he was still shyer than Will, and didn't ever talk, even when they were all alone and Will asked him a question.

Will knew he could talk though, because it was winter and they had begun sharing a bed to keep warm and sometimes when Hannibal had nightmares, which was often, he would talk in his sleep. He didn't talk when he was awake though, which was okay, because Will liked being able to talk, and Hannibal seemed to like listening.

"I think I want to help people when I'm older. I don't know how yet."

Hannibal stared at him for a while after Will told him that. He often watched Will, but this seemed… heavier. Like he was saving this moment, preserving it. Hannibal did that sometimes, although Will couldn't find any pattern between the moments he chose to save.

Hannibal tilted his head at another of the boys, playing on the orphanage grounds below their perch on the rooftop. He was changing the subject, asking for Will's observations of another boy.

Will nodded, looking out. It was fun, this game. It made his empathy seem useful, instead of the curse it normally was. He landed on Andrius. He was the one who bullied Will the most, although he'd never tell Hannibal that. He didn't want Hannibal to get in trouble, and he was certain he would, somehow, if Will told Hannibal about the bullies and the bruises on his skin.

"Andrius. He has a crush on one of the nurses, the one with red hair. He hasn't told anyone, but he looks at pretty things more now, and I think he's trying to work up the courage to show her. I don't get it, because all the nurses are ancient."

Hannibal fixed him with a wry look, a mix of they're not that old, don't be ridiculous and I'm older than you, and we both know you like me.

Will stuck his tongue out in response, laughing. They watched the rest of the boys for a while, playing and doing chores, yelling and fighting. Eventually, Will remembered the wood carvings he'd been working on for Hannibal, a coiled snake and a dog. He reached for the loose shingle he'd hid them behind, intending to present them to Hannibal as a gift, but halfway through the motion, Hannibal grabbed his wrist painfully tight, yanking it enough to pull Will off balance.

"Ow! Hannibal, what?" Will glared at him, trying futilely to pull his wrist back from Hannibal's iron grip. Hannibal glared back, angrier than Will had ever seen him, and pulled up Will's sleeve to expose his bruised arm.

Will flushed, angry and ashamed. Hannibal wasn't supposed to know about the bruises. He was supposed to think Will was just as strong and impressive as him, not weak, because if he thought Will was weak like everyone else did then he would leave Will too and then he'd be all alone.

Will pulled his arm back with enough force that he nearly toppled backwards, pulling the sleeve back down like covering it would make Hannibal forget what he had seen.

"It's not that big of a deal, okay? I just…" Will tried to think of some explanation that wasn't, I'm weak, and everyone knows it, they hurt me and I can't stop it. He'd been good at excuses, when he was younger and protecting his father. He just fell, or was playing football with the neighborhood kids, or wasn't watching where he was going and hit something. But he couldn't lie to Hannibal, they saw right through each other, and normally Will thought it was proof they were the best of friends but right now he hated it.

Hannibal was still glaring at him, gesturing at his own arms, asking about Will's bruises.

"I… some of the boys… I shouldn't have been there anyway, I knew better. It's fine Hannibal. Please."

Hannibal shook his head, clearly wanting Will to elaborate. He gestured at the grounds, still filled with boys, before pointing back at Will. Which ones hurt you?

Will hesitated. “Are you mad at them, or me?”

Hannibal froze for a moment, before pointing at the boys below them. Them. Then he rushed forward, enveloping Will in a crushing hug. Will started crying, trying in vain to hold in his tears before they fell into Hannibal’s shoulder. Hannibal just tightened his grip, allowing Will to cry himself out. Hannibal wouldn’t leave him, Hannibal wasn’t mad at him.

Finally, Will has subsided to occasional sniffles, and Hannibal pulled back enough to see Will's face. Again, he gestured between the boys below them and Will, asking who had been hurting them.

This time, Will hesitated for a different reason. Hannibal might not hurt him, but he wasn’t… kind, like most people. If Will told him who was hurting him, then Hannibal would hurt those boys badly. Maybe even kill them, and it would be Will’s fault that they died, Will’s fault if Hannibal got in trouble for it.

But… not telling Hannibal would be pushing him away, and Will couldn’t lose Hannibal, not for anything, but especially not for Will’s own fear. Hannibal accepted all of Will, Will could do the same for him.

So he told him the names of all the boys who hurt him, and when Hannibal slipped into their shared bed the next night with hands wet from the river but clean of any trace of incriminating blood, Will curled tighter around him, and fell back asleep.

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